DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 791 IR 058 047

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TITLE	Internet Librarianship: Traditional Roles in a New Environment.
PUB DATE	2000-08-00
NOTE	7p.; In: IFLA Council and General Conference: Conference Proceedings (66th, Jerusalem, Israel, August 13-18, 2000); see IR 057 981.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla66/papers/005-120e.htm.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cataloging; Information Technology; *Internet; Job Skills; Library Instruction; *Library Role; Library Science; *Library Services
IDENTIFIERS	*Technological Change

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at some of the potential roles that librarians could adopt in the age of the Internet; e.g., resource discovery, cataloging the Internet, and user education. It outlines the effect that networked information is having on the library profession. It identifies the new roles that information professionals are performing and shows that traditional professional library skills will continue to provide a good foundation for the sector. The paper concludes with a look at how some of the skills we traditionally associate with librarianship have been applied within the Internet environment. (Contains 14 references.) (MES)

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ED 450 791

IFLANET Search Contacts
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
Annual Conference

IFLA 2000 JERUSALEM
Conference Proceedings

66th IFLA Council and General Conference

Jerusalem, Israel, 13-18 August

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Code Number: 005-120-E
Division Number: V
Professional Group: Management and Marketing
Joint Meeting with: Information Technology and Social Sciences Libraries
Meeting Number: 120
Simultaneous Interpretation: *No*

Internet Librarianship: Traditional Roles in a New Environment

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Abstract

This paper looks at some of the potential roles that librarians could adopt in the age of the Internet. It will outline the effect that networked information is having on the library profession. It will identify the new roles that information professionals are performing and shows that traditional professional library skills will continue to provide a good foundation for the sector. The paper concludes with a look at how some of the skills we traditionally associate with librarianship have been applied within the Internet environment.

Paper

The Internet is democratising information, empowering the masses and allowing end-users access to a vast array of resources. It is also significantly altering the work of information professionals. This paper will look at some of the roles that information professionals have developed and will suggest that the skills that support these are as relevant as ever in this new networked information era. This paper will go on to consider how these roles and skills transfer into a networked environment with reference to experience drawn from my own work as an Internet Librarian.

Changing Environment

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The main focus of this paper will be on the most notable change to affect the working practices of librarians in recent years - the increase in electronic information and communication technologies and in particular networked information.

These network advances have transformed modes of communication and will result in significant changes to traditional library structures to accommodate organised information and access to it. From your desktop it is now possible to "link easily and cost effectively into services, systems and information which were previously either not accessible or not even known"[i]. The characteristics of the environment in which librarians are now working include: greater access to a range of information; increased speed in acquiring information; greater complexity in locating, analysing and linking information; constantly changing technology; lack of standardisation of both hardware and software; continuous learning for users and library staff and substantial financial investment for technology[ii].

Traditional Roles and Skills

The information that users require may be accessed differently but the skills information professionals need to manage this information can be adapted from established practices. There is no denying that this is a new global library environment and it is one in which librarians are still finding their way. However, the foundations of the profession and the skills and roles associated with it will help to ensure librarians survival. The core skills traditionally associated with information professionals which include information handling skills, training and facilitating skills, evaluation skills and concern for the customer are all still relevant. These skills cover cataloguing, classification, indexing, enquiry work and user education all functions which if managed by librarians will help to make the Internet an easier place to navigate. Librarians in all sectors have built up roles and library services based on collections and users needs and according to Creth the "values that are the foundation of the library profession should remain the same into the next century…values of service, quality, universal access, and co-operation".[iii] It is the way in which these values are translated into operations and activities that will undergo substantial change.

Lancaster correctly states that in order to justify its existence in the electronic world, "the library must continue to perform one of the most important functions it now performs in the print-on-paper world: to organise the universe of resources in such a way that those most likely to be of value to the user community are made most accessible to this community, physically and intellectually."[iv].The vast amount of information available in a networked environment suggests that there is more than ever before a role for trained intermediaries with search skills, abilities to analyse and evaluate resources and match needs with sources. The traditional library skills mentioned above should be reassessed and their value to information services in the electronic environment applied. For example, the skills of cataloguing and classification can be used to improve the end users experience of networked information retrieval. The creation of meaningful metadata files based on cataloguing principles can help users find needles in the Internet haystack. The creation of catalogues including electronic resources can ensure access, authenticity, reliability and validity of networked resources.

The increasing amount of information available to users and the ways in which it can be accessed has in theory made it easier for users to get the information

they require. However, in practice there is now a danger that they can be overwhelmed by the amount of information they receive making it difficult to locate the exact information they seek as well as overseeing issues of accuracy and authenticity. The role of librarian as both user-educator and intermediary is prevalent in this environment.

The foundations of librarianship, which include skills such as cataloguing and user education are, as explained above, as relevant in an electronic age as they are in a print based one and will continue to provide a solid base of skills.

New Roles and Skills

In addition to the professional skills mentioned, the librarian of the future must be equipped with a wide range of personal and transferable skills in order to manage the changing environment in which he or she works. The importance of transferable skills over information technology skills should be highlighted here. Management and interpersonal skills will make librarians more effective managers of networked resources and services. As Hastings says "it is more important that digital librarians possess particular personal qualities (which are innate) rather than specific technical expertise (which can be learned)."[v]

This is not to say that the way to avoid the electronic age is for library professionals to stick their heads in the sand. The information professional must change and adapt to the new electronic information environment, he or she must learn about new technologies and be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of them. Librarians should not feel threatened by computers and technical developments but should move forward with the new technology and take a pivotal role within organisations.[vi]

Information professionals within libraries are playing an increasing role in dealing with information in electronic formats by creating Web pages to promote their services to external customers and choosing automated library management systems. Skills in information organisation are more necessary in this age of information explosion. Library and information professionals have a key role to play in this era. For example, librarians are well equipped to take intranet projects through the various stages of design and maintenance as they understand their users and their organisations information needs and have the range of skills to manage knowledge effectively.

The role of the librarian in this context is to help users find the information they require then provide them with the tools to assess and use the resources for their individual needs. Creth suggests that librarians achieve this by "actively seek(ing) out users in a variety of settings" and by making "full use of information and multimedia technology" by offering instruction in a variety of formats (including Web based instruction and online tutorials).[vii]

Working in an Internet Environment

I am project manager for Biz/ed[viii] which is based at the Institute for Learning and Research Technology[ix], University of Bristol[x]. Biz/ed is an Internet based educational resource for business and economics academic staff, librarians, researchers and students. The management of the Web site itself is a good example of transferring traditional library skills to the Internet environment. Biz/ed itself contains over 4000 static Web pages which have to be organised in a way which will make it easy for users to find the information they require.

One of my main responsibilities as project manager for Biz/ed is to oversee resource discovery in the areas of business, management and economics for the Social Science, Business and Law Hub (SOSIG)[xi]. SOSIG is one of the 'faculty' based hubs which make up the RDN (Resource Discovery Network)[xii]. The RDN is the UK's 'academic library of Internet resources', supporting academics by offering access to thousands of networked resources.

Cataloguing the Internet

The Internet resources selected by the three information professionals who currently contribute to Biz/ed are entered into an Internet catalogue which is available on Biz/ed or by cross searching SOSIG. The catalogue is a collection of high quality Internet resources located on servers around the world which holds over 1600 records. The catalogue can be searched or browsed and has the added value of resource descriptions which allow users to decide whether the resource is worth accessing. The Biz/ed Internet Catalogue is the Internet version of an academic library. The gateway points to Internet resources but applies many of the principles and practices of traditional librarianship to the collection. Every resource has been selected, classified and catalogued by an information professional. Biz/ed has a collection management policy, quality selection criteria, a classification system, and catalogue records and rules. These methods are widely recognised as being essential for the organisation of printed information, and they translate very effectively to the electronic environment.

Gateways such as Biz/ed can be seen as the electronic equivalent of academic libraries. The librarians submitting resources into this catalogue are serving a similar function to those building traditional print collections based on journals and books.

User Education on the Internet

As the Web is increasingly becoming the first place that students will look for materials the role of information professional as intermediary will also grow in importance. As librarians working with this medium it is up to us to introduce the strengths and weaknesses of the Internet as we would any other library resource during our user education programmes. Just as a traditional academic library offers a programme of "user education" to students and lecturers to maximise the benefit they receive from the library, UK librarians working in the Internet environment in conjunction with the RDN are developing networked user education to help people to get more from this very rich information service. It is our experience that many users do not realise how rich a source the Internet can be and that it can be used to find many research and teaching materials. Traditional library user education in a university, college or school offers users:

- Library tours - to become familiar with the layout of sections of the library
- Library induction sessions - to learn about the services available and to learn how to use them
- Subject guides - to identify the key information resources for a particular discipline
- Support from subject librarians - to get specialist help
- Information skills development - to learn transferable skills in information handling

By applying a traditional library role such as user education and the knowledge of the best resources available for their subjects in the Internet environment an

Internet librarian is well placed to provide a comprehensive Internet information seeking skills induction.

I am currently producing 'Internet Business Manager' for the RDN Virtual Training Suite[xiii]. The RDN has funding to create ten Web-based, interactive tutorials designed to help students and lecturers develop their "Internet information skills" and to offer a subject-based introduction to discovering, choosing and using high quality Internet resources and materials. The RDN Training Suite will cover the key information skills for the new Internet environment. They will introduce basic ideas, techniques and examples of how the Internet can be used in education within specific subject disciplines. The tutorials will be free to access via the World Wide Web, and will each offer a self-paced lesson lasting around 15-30 minutes. It is also envisaged that these tutorials will help academic librarians who need tools to support their user education programmes

The tutorials will be based on the Internet Detective[xiv] model. Internet Detective is an interactive, online tutorial that provides an introduction to the issues of information quality on the Internet and teaches the skills required to evaluate critically the quality of an Internet resource. It offers a variety of learning methods, including tutorials, exercises, worked examples and quizzes.

Working on this project I am able to bring my subject expertise, library skills and Internet knowledge together to create a user education programme for Internet users interested in the areas of business and management in effect becoming a subject librarian of the Internet.

This paper has discussed the relevance of traditional library skills in the new era of networked information. It has shown that librarians in all sectors have an important role to play in shaping the Internet through resource discovery and by familiarising themselves with Internet cataloguing standards they can help to ensure consistent records are built. They also have an essential role in teaching their users about critical information seeking on the Internet and assessing the materials they find for quality. If librarians successfully transfer the foundations of the profession into this new medium they will continue to be seen as vital information intermediaries.

Footnotes

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viii. **Biz/ed**
http://www.bized.ac.uk

ix. **ILRT**
http://www.ilrt.bris.ac.uk

x. **University of Bristol**
http://www.bris.ac.uk

xi. **SOSIG**
http://www.sosig.ac.uk

xii. **RDN**
http://www.rdn.ac.uk

xiii. **RDN Virtual Training Suite**
http://www.rdn.ac.uk

xiv. **Internet Detective**
http://www.sosig.ac.uk/desire/internet-detective.html

Latest Revision: *May 7, 2000*

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